

Star Wars

Wizard's RPG Stories

source : <http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=starwars/newsarchive>
upload : 10.IV.2006

Dark Hands

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Living in the Cularin system, it doesn't take very long to realize that life is far from black and white. Sometimes, the shades of gray blur so badly that it can be impossible to tell right from wrong. In a star system with a deceased crime lord as one of its greatest heroes, values like law, justice, and nobility can take on entirely new meanings. On Cularin, crime usually pays, innocence can get you killed, mercy sometimes gives the enemy a second shot, and the good guys often wear black...

He was running so fast that it was getting hard to breathe. The complex sprawled on forever, with walks of moving metal all around. This Separatist facility was in charge of making dwarf spider droids -- small walking robots with massive guns and sophisticated targeting arrays. A staple of the Separatist ground assault forces all over the galaxy, the droids were very important to the war effort and extremely effective in battle.

Effective, it would seem, against anything but a Jedi. As he fled through the factory, he managed to rasp another order into his wrist comm. At his words, a wall of steel doors slid open, and a dozen walkers clattered into the corridor behind him. He spared himself one look back, just long enough to see the droids opening fire on the hellion chasing him.

Sparks and blaster fire were all he could glimpse, but the sounds were unmistakable. The low hum of an energy blade and the shearing screams of rent metal meant he'd bought himself less time than he'd hoped. He had to get to the control platform, had to get to the communications console, had to warn the Count that the facility had been compromised. If the Jedi knew about this place, it was only a matter of time before the Republic Army arrived -- assuming it wasn't here already.

His brief respite ended with a sudden explosion behind him. For a fleeting moment, he held onto a dim hope that the detonation had killed his adversary. That was dashed by a sudden high-pitched whine that rose sharply over him -- the distinct sound of a Jedi, lightsaber blazing, leaping into the air. Wide eyed, he looked up and saw a billow of robes disappear into the shadowed scaffolding high above the factory floor.

He had no time to lose; the Jedi could be anywhere now. Turning sharply at the smelting chambers, he dashed down a long corridor lined in steel and cooling fans. Normally, the oscillating blowers would have kept the temperature in the passageway moderate, but the Jedi's first strike upon entering the complex was to take out all secondary systems. Now only internal doors could open, and the floor-level climate controls were gone. That meant a grueling run through oppressive heat.

The strain was already beginning to show. He could hear his heart beating like a Wookiee war drum, though whether it came from fear or exertion, he couldn't tell. In any case, he was reaching his limits. If he didn't make it to the comm array soon, the Jedi wouldn't have to worry about stopping him.

He was only a few steps from the end of the corridor when the broken pieces of a battle droid clattered into the passage from a side hallway. A silhouette, backlit by the glow of a lightsaber, fell over the severed robot's parts. With a yelp of terror, he gathered his strength and used his own abandoned Jedi training to make a tremendous leap toward the ceiling.

It was everything he could do to reach the low-hanging girder, but he caught it and scrambled up onto it quickly. For a few precious seconds, he caught his breath, and then he tried desperately to mask his thoughts and cloud the perceptions of the Jedi on his heels. Since turning his back on the Jedi Council and joining Count Dooku's secession, he'd learned so many truths about the Force. The power of what the Jedi would so falsely label the dark side was his to command. Now he used it to try to conceal himself.

After several minutes of rest, he felt confident enough to move on. Shielded in the powers of confusion and doubt, he was channeling his own fear and the anger that comes from being afraid. It was making him stronger - - perhaps even strong enough now to cut down that Jedi fool.

Riding high on dark emotions, he leapt from rafter to rafter over the tumultuous factory floor. Below him, he caught glimpses of the Jedi in combat with the facility's defenders. Most of the guards were droids of one kind or another, but the occasional Geonosian also contributed to the fracas. He shared his master's dislike for anything not Human, but even he had to admit the strange aliens had excellent mechanical skills. It was a shame to see so many of them cut down as he made his escape, but that's really all their lives were worth, weren't they?

He made it to the center pylon of the factory and slid down. The moment his feet touched the steel floor, his lightsaber was in hand. He kept the weapon off to avoid drawing attention while he accessed the command codes for the communication matrix. But he wanted it ready in case the impossible happened and a single Jedi made it through everything the facility could unleash against intruders.

Suddenly, he glimpsed a shadow flitting by and heard a metallic clattering sound at his feet. Looking down, he had just enough time to register the source of the sound before he instinctively hurled himself out of the way and rolled down the main gantry nearby. An explosion ripped apart the factory's main console - - right where he'd been standing just seconds before - - and shattered the installation's main support column in a blaze of fire and light.

A grenade? What kind of Jedi uses grenades? He picked himself up, ignoring the pain in his back and side where he'd landed awkwardly. His arrogance and confidence began to dim as he realized what that detonation had cost him. Without the array, he had no chance to contact Count Dooku. There was no way to call for a rescue or warn the massing Separatist fleet of the facility's plight.

A voice rang out of the shadows, impossible to locate directly. "If it helps, the transmission dish is already destroyed. You could not have gotten a message out in any case." The voice had an odd tone - - not mocking or cruel, but strangely resigned, almost hesitant.

He ignited his lightsaber, the brilliant white-blue beam a measure of comfort in what was rapidly becoming a very chilling world. "Damn you! The Separatist cause is just! You and your corrupt Council serve an outdated regime!" He knew his words were useless, but they made him feel better as he waited for the Jedi to show himself.

He didn't expect what happened next. "You are probably right," sighed the voice.

Mind reeling, he blinked. "I'm right? But if you don't believe in the war, why are you fighting?" Could he have been wrong about this intruder? He'd heard that to prove her mettle, the Dark Jedi Ventress had sliced her way through an arena of gladiators and even tried to kill Dooku himself. Was this all some destructive way to get the same kind of attention?

I am not here to join you.

The Jedi was in his head! But how? His mind was protected by the dark side. No Jedi should have been able to penetrate such a wall of shadows and hate. "Then... then why are you here? Why have you done all this?"

He raised his lightsaber and tried to see past its cerulean glow, seeking to find his adversary with his thoughts, his feelings. The dark metal all around him provided a hundred places for an assassin to cower, but nothing living could hide from the Force.

"I was sent by the Council to stop you. To shut down this factory and stop its flow of droids into the war. And I was sent for you. Your defection cannot be allowed. You made a commitment to the Jedi Order." The sound literally seemed to be coming from all around him. Terror began to seep back into the darkest places of his heart. Reaching out with the Force, he tried to find the speaker and was met only with shadows once more.

"But you don't believe what you're doing is just! I can sense your doubt!" He paused for a moment and then continued, now wholly certain of the claim he was about to make. "You've already started down the path to the dark side! Why would you serve the Republic when you know it's wrong?"

In that moment, he sensed an echo of a troubled mind, heavily burdened with guilt, doubt, and regret. He knew exactly where the Jedi was now - - standing right behind him! With a shout of rage, he let the dark side burn through him and swung around in a deadly arc, channeling all of his fury into a single, devastating blow.

But halfway through his swing, a black-gloved hand drove the hilt of an unignited lightsaber into his chest. The searing pain of its violet blade erupting into life was the last thing he ever felt. His hands spasmed open and sent his own saber crashing to the floor. Dead before he fell, he missed the answer to his question.

"Because sometimes we just have to do as we're told."